

**Preparations for the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb (III)—Looking ahead to the cycles after the celebrations**

In the weeks leading up to the first of the two bicentenaries to be celebrated by the Bahá'í world, individuals, institutions, and communities are remaining mindful of the period after the celebrations and ensuring that arrangements would be in place to respond to the expected surge in the number of those attracted to the vivifying Message of Bahá'u'lláh. The Universal House of Justice, in its 18 May 2016 letter written on its behalf, stated that “the spiritual forces that are sure to be released on that most auspicious occasion will do much to spur the friends into action as they commence the eight cycles that lie between the two bicentenaries, during which the greatest share of the effort needed to fulfil the goal of the Plan will be required.”

The stories in this edition of *Reflections on Growth* highlight how each of the three protagonists of the Plan are preparing to build on the momentum gained in the weeks immediately after the Twin Anniversaries. These efforts include expanding a pool of ready and capable tutors, children's class teachers, and junior youth animators; making the necessary arrangements for intensive institute campaigns over a period of a day, a weekend, or longer; holding children's class festivals and junior youth camps; having meaningful conversations about Bahá'u'lláh, His life, and His mission through a series of firesides and home visit campaigns; opening up spaces for communal worship to welcome scores of friends; ensuring the availability of educational materials and literature; and finding creative ways to reinforce schemes of coordination in anticipation of the unprecedented numbers of new souls connecting to the Blessed Beauty.

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**AUSTRALIA**

In preparing for the first of the two bicentenary celebrations, the Ballarat community in the **Barwon** cluster has intensified its efforts over the last year to strengthen a pattern of expansion and consolidation in the neighbourhood. A nucleus of friends, including new acquaintances and veteran believers in the community, have participated in several spaces to deepen their understanding of the life of Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings, preparing for the period after the two-hundred-year anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. Concepts and themes highlighted in Book 6 of the sequence of institute courses are being drawn upon to illustrate how a conversation may unfold about the main purpose of the Bahá'í Faith and the Manifestation of God for today. In a few words, they describe the steps they have in place for the days that follow the celebrations:

A series of firesides are organized for the week after the celebrations for the friends and contacts participating in the events. These gatherings will involve a direct presentation of the Faith during which those present will be invited to take an active role in the community-building activities currently taking place in Ballarat.

**BELGIUM**

When considering the remarkable opportunities that will be created by the bicentenary celebrations, the Belgian Bahá'í community has focused on enhancing its capacity to welcome new friends into the institute process. With single-minded resolve, believers in isolated areas

and centres of intense activity across the country have been spurred into action to engage many souls in conversations about the life and mission of Bahá'u'lláh and to integrate them seamlessly into the sequence of courses. They have explored creative ways to cultivate an institute process that has become a thriving feature of the life of the community. The friends aimed to open more Book 1 study circles in the final cycle leading up to the bicentenary celebrations in October 2017 and in the weeks immediately after this most auspicious occasion. One of the believers serving on an institution explains:

We have found that by having more experienced tutors visit and accompany the local friends to think creatively about ways to start Book 1, and by holding national gatherings for studying Book 1 over weekends, we were able to have 70 new participants enter the sequence of courses in a single cycle across all clusters in the country. We have also experimented in the St. Catherine neighbourhood in **Brussels** with more regular, week-long periods of outreach followed by home visits and studying prayers with new contacts, culminating in inviting these friends to a full-day study of Book 1. During the course of a cycle, this pattern was repeated three times. We observed that this approach of day-long study circle sessions recreated the collective spirit and enthusiasm of an intensive institute campaign but was easier to organize. This effort led to 10 families in the neighbourhood opening their homes to hosting new devotional gatherings.

In the period immediately after the bicentenary celebrations, a series of these full-day intensive Book 1 sessions will be organized, some at the regional or cluster level, and others in the growing number of neighbourhoods where intensive teaching is taking place. In these neighbourhoods, the goal is to each welcome more than 20 people into Book 1 in the weeks after the celebrations. We will also host a series of meetings for those who have recently finished Book 1 and show a particular enthusiasm for serving as tutors to review the structure and content of Book 1, drawing on elements of Book 7.

There is no doubt that this concerted effort has significantly developed our capacity to reach and engage friends in conversations about Bahá'u'lláh and His vision for the future of humanity, and then to welcome them into the institute process. We recognize that strengthening these capacities lies at the very foundation of a vibrant and growing community. We are also seeing how the increase of the flow of people into Book 1 expresses itself in the expansion of the other core activities. We move forward full of confidence and hope that our efforts will contribute to learning about advancing the process of entry by troops in Belgium during the precious period surrounding the bicentenary celebrations.

## **INDIA**

Members of the cluster agencies and the Local Spiritual Assembly in the Kadaneri village in the **Watrairuppu** cluster in the **Tamil Nadu** state have been consulting on how they will accompany their friends and families before, during, and after the bicentenary celebrations. Having formed teams of two or three, they will visit friends and families in their homes to share the teachings of the Faith and stories from the life of Bahá'u'lláh. Members of each team will take an active role in being with guests during the events and continue meeting with them in the period immediately after.

The friends in the **Watirappu** and **Virudhunagar** clusters are raising up a cadre of local tutors ready to serve the needs of the villages after the bicentenary celebrations. Potential tutors are being identified from among those participating in study circles, particularly in Books 4 and 5. They are being accompanied to study parts of Book 7, to review Book 1, and to then start their own study circle. At least two friends from each of the study circles currently under way are being accompanied in this way.

## **SOUTH AFRICA**

The small nucleus of friends residing in the **Makana** cluster is learning how to sustain a programme of growth by drawing on the support of the wider community. The cluster has 69,000 inhabitants, and among them the Bahá'í community consists of one family and two students enrolled at the university. In one neighbourhood with 700 residents, some 50 youth, junior youth, and children are engaged in community-building activities. The believers foresee that after the Twin Holy Days, a group of local youth from the neighbourhood will be at the heart of efforts to sustain the multiplication of core activities. One of the friends has commented:

A youth gathering was recently held for around 20 youth who live on the same street and spend time together as friends. The aim of the gathering was to develop a pool of individuals who could be trained as both teachers of children's classes and animators of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, ready to welcome new scores of participants in the period after the Twin Anniversaries. During the school holidays, these youth have been going through the main sequence of courses, starting with an intensive study of Books 1 and 2. The service components related to these books are also being practiced during this time, and the community is making every effort to invite many to the upcoming Festivals, including the parents of the children and junior youth in the activities and their siblings, neighbours, and close relatives.

## **UGANDA**

A surge in the number of people engaged in the community-building process is being witnessed in the Bulamuki community of the **Kamuli South** cluster. There are 237 households in this locality, and some 850 people from 100 of these households are currently involved in the activities. For the community to be well prepared to observe this momentous occasion, as many individuals as possible—including parents of the junior youth and children—are being encouraged to develop the habit of praying together, either as members of the same family or as friends living in close proximity to one another. The friends serving in the cluster are striving to strengthen the capacity to consolidate the opportunities that will manifest themselves as a result of this historic occasion. Plans are being made to ensure a cadre of capable tutors is raised, along with a pool of new animators and teachers. The friends also hope to move from 11 junior youth groups with 177 participants and 11 children's classes with 222 participants to more than double these figures, with over 500 participants in each of the two programmes by Ridván 2018. A member of the Bulamuka community explains:

**Raising a cadre of tutors:** Among those hosting and participating in devotional gatherings, individuals are being identified to be trained as tutors during the forthcoming school holidays. The aim is to have 21 study circles with a total of 300 participants in the period after the bicentennial celebrations.

**Establishing a pool of animators:** The friends are also conscious of the need to increase the number of animators so that many more junior youth can become involved in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. Over 47 youth from the region have shown interest in serving as animators and will participate in intensive institute training during the school holidays. They are being accompanied by an experienced animator to carry out home visits to families that have shown interest to have their junior youth engaged in the programme.

**Establishing a pool of children's class teachers:** The 11 children's class teachers in the community have each identified a friend who can also be trained as a teacher. It is hoped that in the period immediately after the bicentenary celebrations, 11 new teachers will be assisted to form 11 new classes. Currently, the potential teachers who have been identified are being accompanied by more experienced teachers to visit homes of potential participants as the conversations with the families will enhance the new teachers' understanding of the growth process.

**Making festivals and camps a regular feature of community life:** Over the years, festivals and camps have created a lot of excitement among the children, junior youth, children's class teachers, animators, and parents. The community plans to include these elements of the educational process as a regular feature of the cycles of activity, including the period that surrounds the Twin Anniversaries.

## UNITED STATES

Believers in the various regions of the United States are aware of the need to prepare in advance to respond to the unprecedented flow of those whose hearts are opened to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty and who share a desire to advance along a path of service. One friend describes below the approach taken in two regions to remain mindful of the opportunities during the period immediately after the bicentenary celebrations.

In the **South Central States** region, the participants of sector meetings in **Dallas** are being guided by the Local Spiritual Assembly to plan for the first of the Twin Anniversaries and the period that follows. It was noted at these meetings that at least 20 tutors will be required to meet the need for new study circles that will emerge from the 11 planned celebrations. They envision expanding the team of tutors by: (a) studying key documents on strengthening the institute process; (b) holding a seminar for Books 1 and 7, which will include youth who have experience tutoring Book 1; (c) visiting all of the tutors in the cluster; and (d) asking current tutors to accompany new tutors by preparing them for the initial conversations and organizing practices of the current institute courses. Intensive studies of Book 1 will be held every weekend after the Twin Holy Days through to the end of November. A youth gathering and institute campaign is also planned for the November holidays and the winter break to mobilize Bahá'í youth and their friends to study Books 3 and 5 in teams. These teams will then hold information sessions during the holidays to form new children's classes and junior youth groups. One thousand copies of the Hidden Words and prayer books have been ordered, along with 300 copies of Book 1.

Local Spiritual Assemblies in the **Southeastern States** region, with the encouragement of the Regional Bahá'í Council, have been studying the second unit

of Book 10 and consulting on how to strengthen conversations that unfold about the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, how to mobilize tutors in time to respond to the numbers that will be inspired by His unifying Message, and how to enhance collaboration among the cluster agencies. In the sector-based reflection meetings of the **Broward** cluster, the friends are appreciating that the bicentenary celebrations are an opportunity to widen circles of contacts who become aware of the life and mission of Bahá'u'lláh. Seminars for tutors of Book 1 are being offered during the consolidation phase of this sixth cycle of the Five Year Plan as preparation to welcome growing numbers into the institute process in the period immediately after the momentous occasions, providing each individual the opportunity to experience how worship and meaningful service can become a part of their daily lives. Those serving as tutors are also reflecting on ways to become more effective in their service. Given the implications that the large numbers of participants will have on the structures for accompanying others in their service, teams are being formed to bolster the progress of each educational imperative and to support an increase in the number of devotional gatherings. Spaces have been created for the friends to study Book 4 to refine their capacity to convey stories of the life of Bahá'u'lláh. Believers are reflecting on how the core activities are evolving in their neighbourhood and how to expand their efforts to be ready to integrate waves of new contacts from a cross section of society inspired to contribute to the community-building process.

## ZAMBIA

The regional and cluster agencies in the **North-Western Province** of Zambia are expanding the pool of human resources in order to be ready to receive many people who are anticipated to attend the bicentennial celebrations and to integrate them into the community-building efforts under way in every locality in the period immediately after the significant events. A friend helping to coordinate these efforts explains some of the steps being taken:

- **Training of tutors prepared to open new groups studying Books 1 and 2 after the bicentennial celebration:** The regional institute board held a seminar with some of the most experienced tutors in the reservoir clusters to review all the books from the main sequence of courses in light of the concepts found in Book 7. This gathering was specifically intended to raise the capacity of this group to accompany an expanding cadre of other tutors, particularly drawing on youth currently moving through the sequence of courses, to be prepared to open up study circles for Books 1 and 2.
- **Raising a cadre of effective tutors of Book 5:** A seminar for new and existing tutors of Book 5 will take place during the school holidays to increase the number of individuals who are able to tutor Book 5 effectively and raise a host of new animators.
- **Translation and availability of materials:** In preparation to welcome large numbers of new souls as actors in the Plan, Book 5 has been translated into the language of the Lunda population and is ready for use in the trainings and seminars that are planned for the period surrounding the first bicentenary celebration in October 2017. The lessons in Grades 1 and 2 of Book 3 have also been translated. The institute board is ensuring that materials will be readily available for the next cycle so that those individuals who are attracted to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh can seamlessly enter into the institute process. A compilation of selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have also been translated into Lunda for use in devotional gatherings.

- **Strengthening coordination through working in teams in anticipation of large numbers:**  
In one of the reservoir clusters, the friends are building capacity for coordination by engaging youth serving as animators and as children's class teachers to work in teams. The cluster coordinators are collaborating with these teams and creating spaces to regularly study guidance from the Universal House of Justice. This approach was pursued in anticipation of the increase in activity after the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh.

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